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ABSTRACT

Effective classroom teaching in Appalachia, as well as in other rural areas, may (1) center on a theme familiar to the students in teaching literature; (2) involve students in socio-drama to help them recognize their identities, empathize with others, and clarify their values; (3) take advantage of the students' culturally acquired predispositions to be person-oriented and to identify with the land; and (4) appreciate the mountaineer's strong sense of independence. Using these suggestions, the teaching of writing may then begin with the simple elements--words--and proceed to sentence construction, the arrangement of a paragraph, the creating of a narration involving several paragraphs, and, finally, the writing of an essay including idea and paragraph organization. (JM)

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COUNTRY ROADS: A REGIONAL APPROACH TO EDUCATION

I.

He's a white American student whose ancestors in this country may be traced back at least two centuries. He speaks English, his religion is that of the majority in this country, and his teacher has an ethnic background that closely resembles his own. He should be faring well in American education, but the sociological profile for this student is alarming: one sociologist[1] notes a pervasive fatalistic attitude toward education which means that this student believes his education is a waste of his time. Another sociologist[2] notes that his view of himself is minuscule and that he produces drawings which show no people at all or people drawn as small as ants in a world full of big trees, hills, houses, and valleys. And statistics show that of all the students in the country, he is one of the most likely to drop out of school before the twelfth grade.[3]

Who is he? Why does he, of all students, have such problems? The answer is that he is an Appalachian school child, one of about three million living high in the eastern mountains and almost within walking distance of a half dozen

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great American cities. The abundance of books, studies, commissions, and committee reports that reveal information about him indicate that he has not yet been significantly helped.

This article, then, is designed to harness, for the first time, current Appalachian sociological data with current educational techniques. It is thus a blueprint for change as well as a list of practical suggestions that can be tested most effectively in individual classrooms throughout the region-- even adapted to rural areas in other parts of America.

A good place to begin is recognition: the entire educational establishment (from teachers' aides to publishers and from classroom teachers to chairmen of education departments) must recognize the Appalachian student's place at the center of his educational milieu. Almost invariably the contrary is true. Jack Weller noted in Yesterday's People that the mountaineer has and does resent education because it comes from without; it's foreign to him and his culture.[4] Textbooks that are given the Appalachian child from kindergarten through college are almost exclusively urban in content because, obviously enough, most American children are either urban or suburban. However, the sound educational adage that one should start with the familiar[5] is violated daily in Appalachian schools because the textbook children who are available for modeling live in apartment houses, talk to garbage men and bakery clerks and feed popcorn to pidgeons in urban parks. On the same day that the Appalachian child in his classroom is groping with Pedro and Maria of the city, he is walking out of hollows to schools or riding yellow school busses from one-half hour to even two hours one-way to consolidated schools. He has never been to a city park to feed the squirrels, but he has probably shot them with his father when they have been out hunting.

Education, then, to be effective must begin where the student is, and with the rural Appalachian student one could try the method of theme teaching, which

means in literature, for example, selecting a motif which would be familiar to him. This is a viable approach to teaching the structure of literature. This view of structure holds that the structure of literature is embodied in what an author pours into his mold, and especially in the recurring themes or broad ideas that are found there. It is these themes that comprise the focus of students' attention during their study. The same themes may be found in a variety of genres-- poems, plays, short stories, novels, songs, and movies. An example of this approach could be a module or unit of study on the family which should certainly include Appalachian attitudes toward stories, poems, art, songs, plays, and television presentations about the Appalachian family. Then, of course, one could expand the study to comparative families such as African, Jewish, suburban or Indian.

A second basic aspect of Appalachian education is the need to recognize the fatalism that permeates both children and adults with regard to education. One reason for the fatalism toward education is the current emphasis on abstract, academic learning at the expense of skill building. The Appalachian is far more likely to appreciate the latter, but the former is also an important part of education in the 20th century world.

An effective antidote to abstractions without altogether losing them is socio-drama which enables students to articulate in a way that also helps them reveal their own identity. Thus teachers are able to learn about their students, and the student is able to involve his own concrete needs and personality in his education. In a literature class, for example, a child may not believe literature is relevant to him, but if asked to re-enact a dramatic scene in the literature, he develops a personal empathy toward the situation and characters of the story. (Jesse Stuart's short story "The Thing You Love" provides such a confrontation between father and son over a family pet.)

Also within this socio-drama context is the opportunity for using value clarification techniques. Certainly today one of the major needs in American education is for students to examine their values as well as those dictated by the American gemeinshaft and gesselshaft societies they live in. Sidney Simon's book, Values Clarification, suggests various activities that could be used in conjunction with the socio-drama.

Still another outgrowth of the socio-drama could be the utilization of transactional analysis, a systematic approach for examining social intercourse. This reveals how all our experiences affect us and impel us to respond to a diversity of human stimuli via the state of a child, parent, or adult. Applying this technique to the socio-drama, we can see how values are stored in the "parent role" of the individual, how an individual shifts to the fantasy of the child when he wishes to escape his parental value orientation, and how the adult being, who represents a computer, examines behavioral priorities before making his choice of values.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Appalachian education should take advantage of the student's culturally acquired predispositions to develop an effective educational atmosphere. Jack Weller has shown that Appalachians tend to be "person-oriented" by which he means that personal relations tend to be more important than occupational relations, than achievement in the community, or than educational success. If a teacher is alert to the predisposition of his students, he'll work to see that he has a personal relationship with the student first. The first week of school could well be spent getting acquainted with the students' neighborhood, his pets, his 4-H projects, and, most important of all, his relatives. Of course we realize that no curriculum and almost no administrators advocate this approach, but isn't the 1965 Appalachian drop-out rate of 65% between grades one through twelve incentive enough to try something that at least has sociological data to back it up?

After all, Robert Coles has pointed out that relatives in Appalachia are important and that the nuclear family of mother, father, and children is by no means the basic unit where even distant relatives are supposed to help in obtaining jobs, providing advice, or helping to care for the farm. Incidentally, another effective way of establishing personal relations with families of students is to use the family as resource persons for telling tales (when studying literature), for singing songs (when studying music), or perhaps for giving demonstrations of building things when working with math or shop.

Another predisposition of Appalachian young people that sociologists have pointed out for us is the Appalachian tendency to identify with the land. Coles indicates that the children, even from infancy, are taught that the land[8] is an extension of their own selves.

A knowledge of this tendency should then lead a teacher to utilize it in his educational atmosphere. The use of maps could just as well be taught by using local maps as by using foreign. Information about soil, biology, zoology, topography, and other geophysical facts could well be taught by using local references. Even when teaching about distant places and things, comparisons with local items would be an effective way of familiarizing the student with the unfamiliar. Of course, much of the knowledge that would enable a teacher to make effective comparisons would have to be acquired outside the standard teacher prepatory curriculum, but if education is to be regionally effective that effort must be made.

Finally, the dominant characteristic of the Appalachian people should not be fought but made an ally. John C. Campbell explained that dominant trait succinctly:

> We have them in the Southern Highlander, an American, a rural dweller of the agricultural class, and a mountaineer who is still more or less of a pioneer. His dominant trait is independence raised to the fourth power.[9]

Later commentators in Appalachia have testified to the prevalence of the trait of independence (Coles, p. 291) even though the trait may often be given pejorative names. But we teachers are often irritated by students who have been taught by their culture that they do not need anything much that the school or other institutions have to offer. In fact, teachers in conferences with recalcitrant students and parents usually begin by trying to convince the mountaineers of their need for educaton. Such tactics, though well meaning, ultimately destroy the mountaineer's sense of independence, and he, sensing this, will usually resist the teacher's efforts. Rather, in keeping with the spirit of this essay, one should seek to show how education will increase independence. After all, a man who knows bookkeeping or welding or chemistry or scientific farming is less subject to the whims and wishes of others. Of course, he may indeed continue to kowtow, but the independent man can lay up stores in his brain as well as in his barn if and when he wants to.

II.

Having examined the sociological background of the Appalachian child and shown how educational techniques based on regional data can nurture a more positive self-concept, we can now proceed to use the regional approach in teaching the child the skills of writing.

One tested method of teaching writing involves building from the simplest elements of writing to the most complex. For example, one must begin with words for the illiterate or seriously deprived student, proceed to the construction of sentences, advance to the arrangement of a paragraph, continue on to a narration involving several paragraphs, and finally achieve some sophistication by dealing with an essay which involves the organization of ideas and the arrangement of several paragraphs within each major division.

For our purposes, we'll assume that the student is acquainted with the words of the English language, that is, that he can spell and define a sufficient number of words to be able to communicate with them. However, our regional student, we'll also assume, cannot communicate with sentences. He is uncertain about subject-verb agreement, is likely to construct random sentence fragments, and has almost no idea about the arrangement of a sentence for effective emphasis.

To begin with, then, the teacher in Appalachia will not spend much time trying to convince the student of the importance of learning to write (his independence is likely to cause him either to argue about or sulkily reject the advice, and his fatalism attitude toward education will not be broken by one, two, or even a half-dozen pretty speeches.). However, with little introduction, the teacher should develop as soon as possible a strong personal relationship with the class, then develop whatever techniques are at his command for stimulating the students within the group dynamics of the class.[9] Cohesiveness is an excellent technique for the Appalachian region as is starting some kind of organ of communication such as Eliot Wigginton[10] used so brilliantly in his Foxfire magazine and books. When there is some kind of internal motivation that realistically and regionally reaches the needs of the students, the teacher may begin with a stimulus-response session in which the student writes sentences while he listens to Appalachian music (bluegrass, Scotch-irish, string music, etc.) either by way of records and tapes or, better yet, by listening to a resource person from the community who could play while the students work out the exercise. Other stimulus-response sessions with the sentence involve Appalachian slides, an Appalachian film, or perhaps a socio-drama based on a problem germane to their lifestyle.

When sentences can be put together with some effectiveness and consistency, the paragraph is the next logical hurdle to approach. Description may provide an effective vehicle for learning about the paragraph, and, of course, descriptions of the scenes that impinge on the students' lives should be given priority: favorite places in the neighborhood, the family kitchen, local characters, or even brief incidents in the students' lives. In addition to reading the student materials in class, the descriptive possibilities could be enriched by reading descriptive passages from the fiction of Jesse Stuart and Thomas Wolfe as well as from the nonfiction of Robert Coles' Migrants, Sharecroppers, Mountaineers or Maurice Brooks' The Appalachians (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1965).

A considerable rise in interest can be expected when students begin to put their paragraphs together in narrations because in Appalachia there is a strong, widespread tradition of storytelling. For example, the student could be encouraged to retell family stories or hunting stories which he has experienced or heard about, or he could relate some visit to a relative's house, a serious illness, a serious accident, or the first day in a new classroom. This experience could be enriched by reading from the short folk tales collected by Ruth Ann Musick in her Telltale Lilac Bush and Other Tales (Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 1965) or perhaps Richard Chase's Jack Tales (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1943), but Appalachian tales need not be used exclusively after the initial examples. In fact, much could be learned about Appalachian ways by comparing regional tales with those of Greece, Russia, France, or other places.

The next step, and perhaps the last for most English classes, would involve some sophisticated use of paragraphs and organization. The teacher may have the students explain how to skin a squirrel, churn butter, train

a horse, set a muskrat trap, stitch a quilt, etc. Here again resource people from the community could be used effectively to show how things are done that the students may then be asked to explain. And again, one could use the regional interests of the students to develop the skill of describing a process.

In conclusion, the technique for teaching writing that is used as an illustration in this paper is by no means the only one that could be used; however, other ways of approaching the teaching of writing could be modified to consider the regional needs of students. Furthermore, we believe that these regional considerations could be used at any level from the early grades on through the college experience and that the frequent use of comparative outside literature and materials would go far toward broadening the students' awareness and perception. Finally, teachers in regions other than Appalachia would do well to examine the specific local characteristics and needs of their students, and rather than ignore or suppress these characteristics, we should put them to work in the service of recognized educational competencies.

ENDNOTES

1. John D. Photiadis, West Virginians in Their Own State and in Cleveland, Ohio (Morgantown, WV: Appalachian Center, 1969), p. 30.

2. Robert Coles, Migrants, Sharecroppers, Mountaineers (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1971), pp. 270-1.

3. "Of the ten states in the nation with the lowest percentage of sixteen and seventeen-year-olds in school, eight were Appalachian states." Franklin Parker, "Appalachia: Education in a Depressed Area," Phi Kappa Phi Journal, Fall, 1970, p. 29.

4. Jack Weller, Yesterday's People (Lexington, Ky.: The University Press of Kentucky, 1966), p. 103.

5. Sylvia Farnham-Diggory, Cognitive Processes in Education (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), p. 103.

6. Parker, p. 33.

7. Coles, p. 42.

8. Coles, p. 203.

9. John C. Campbell, The Southern Highlander and His Homeland (1921; rpt. Lexington, Ky.: The University Press of Kentucky, 1969), p. 91.

10. Jack Welch, "The Importance of Cohesiveness in Writing Classes," College Composition and Communication, 24 (1973), pp. 291-294.

11. Eliot Wigginton's introduction to Foxfire (New York: Doubleday, 1972) should be required reading for every Appalachian teacher.

12. Appalachian films can be obtained from the Appalachian Room, Main Library, West Virginia University, Morgantown, WV 26506.